

Thomas J. Iurino

Revitalizing America's Canals



*Towpath Trail,
Lock 27, Cuyahoga
Valley National
Recreation Area,
Ohio.*

Of the 5,000 miles of transportation canals that were operated during the nation's canal heyday during the early 1800s, today 1,000 miles of these canals' overgrown towpaths have been reclaimed for public use as trails.

This was one of the findings of Towpath-to-Trails, the latest joint-effort of the Park Service's Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance program (RTCA) and The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC). NPS and RTC released this study in October 1995.

RTC and RTCA, which have been promoting rail-trail conversions since the mid-1980s, have turned to canal towpaths as another option for the hundreds of communities across the country who are eager to find ways to develop a local, interconnected system of greenways.

"Greenways are on the 'hot list' of hundreds of state and local governments," observes Rory Robinson, the Park Service lead on the Towpath-to-Trails project. "Restoration of canal towpaths as trails offers communities a great way to build their greenway systems."

While canals have always been a draw for history buffs, Robinson hopes that the study shows the benefit of thinking about canals as recreational resources as well. "Canals tell a story, but unfortunately, that story isn't widely known because sometimes the canal is overlooked," says Robinson. "The more people we draw to canals, the better the chance that they will be preserved and used."

Where towpath trails have been developed, they have become extremely popular. The 184-mile C&O Canal, a unit of the Park Service, is visited by 4 million people annually. Other popular towpaths include: 200 miles (and counting) of the 520-mile Erie Canal, developed through a joint venture of New York State and hundreds of local governments; the 10-mile Augusta (GA) Canal, operated by the City; and the 66-mile Delaware and Raritan Canal, managed by the State of New Jersey.

RTC and RTCA hope that other communities can learn from these successes. "There are 31 canal towpath-to-trail projects underway today," says Kristine Olka, of the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, "With the results of this study, we hope to assess what works and what doesn't so we can offer practical assistance to these local groups." To address the most common issues in towpath-to-trail conversions, RTC and RTCA are developing several "how-to" fact sheets.

Both Robinson and Olka presented the study's findings and their plans for future collaboration at Networking the Nation With Trails, RTC's 5th national conference held November 15-18 in Clearwater, Florida.

For copies of the study, contact Rory Robinson at 216-657-2950, or Kristine Olka at 202-797-5407.

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*Towpath Trail south
of canal, Cuyahoga
Valley National
Recreation Area.
Photos by Rory
Robinson.*



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